

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001829

SIPDIS

NSC FOR CBARTON
HQ SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/04/2015
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: GOV DOGGED BY REPORTS OF MILITARY DISSENSION

REF: CARACAS 01657

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

1. (C) Summary: The Venezuelan Armed Forces' operations against illegal armed groups on the Colombian border begun after a Venezuelan soldier died in a May 17 shoot-out with irregular troops have not yet abated despite some internal disagreements over the new policy, accusations of human rights violations, and opposition attempts to exaggerate negative reports. Army Commander Maj. Gen. Raul Baduel has called the border operations "duly authorized." Although Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez did order the deployment, cracks in military unity are apparent. Chavez stands to alienate some GOV officials and border residents whether the operation against guerrillas intensifies or fizzles out. The Venezuelan opposition has also exploited rumors of other incidents within the armed forces, such as alleged plans to name Cuban leader Fidel Castro an honorary Venezuelan "General in Chief." End summary.

2. (C) Plan Sovereignty, the Venezuelan military's operation against illegal armed groups on the Colombian border, remains in force. The operation began after irregular forces killed a Venezuelan soldier on May 17. According to early June press reports, Venezuelan troops have now detained 15 people in Tachira State since mid-May. DAO sources say that the military has not sent more troops to Tachira; rather, they have merely augmented the size and frequency of patrols. A face-off between Venezuelan soldiers and other irregular forces also occurred in Zulia State in early June, first infantry division commander Maj. Gen. Virgilio Lameda told the press. He said no casualties resulted from the confrontation with the armed group, which had fled toward Colombia. Lameda claimed the Venezuelan military had about 1,000 troops guarding the Zulia State-Colombia border region.

3. (U) Indications that supporters of President Hugo Chavez are divided over Plan Sovereignty have begun to emerge from GOV sources. Miranda state legislator and opposition NGO leader Oscar Perez showed the press in late May a video of Tachira State Governor Ronald Blanco La Cruz telling a group of local merchants that Brig. Gen. Oscar Carrizales had received threatening phone calls because of his involvement in the operation. La Cruz urged any who feared to denounce pro-Chavez criminal elements to report directly to him. The operations have also aggravated relations between Chavez's Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) and the pro-GOV Fatherland for All (PPT) parties after a rumor emerged that the military was rounding up PPT members. The PPT secretary general in Tachira told a reporter that the rumor was false, but he accused the army of detaining members of GOV social missions rather than irregular forces. He further claimed there was "a campaign against the PPT," which may have been a reference to the case against PPT Governor of Guarico State Eduardo Manuitt, whom the National Assembly is investigating for corruption and human rights violations.

Human Rights

4. (C) Residents of two rural Tachira mountain towns went to the GOV human rights ombudsman's office in early June to protest that soldiers had beaten and threatened to kill them, according to press reports. One local, a self-proclaimed Chavista who worked for Chavez's literacy Mission Robinson, added that they had thrown a woman in jail along with her newborn baby. A local PPT deputy said he would ask the legislature to open an investigation, according to June 9 press reports. Without denying the mistreatment of civilians, Maj. Gen. Baduel announced the following day that the public could rest assured that the army did not intend to protect any human rights violators. Asked if the May-June operation had increased reports of violations, a Venezuelan human rights leader related to poloff a March case of the army torturing and killing a local peasant while searching for guerrillas. Not commenting specifically on the recent events, he said that human rights and peasants organizations in the region had been reporting much abuse by the army this year. Having conducted interviews throughout the border

region in 2003, he concluded that the border population did not trust Venezuelan authorities and considered the guerrillas the lesser of two evils.

Opposition Spotlights Divisions, Spins Rumors

15. (U) The opposition and its sympathetic media outlets have tried to portray the operation as a cause of major GOV infighting. Oscar Perez, following up on internet rumors of disputes both between the service branches and between different commands, said that the Defense Ministry ordered Brig. Gen. Carrizales to release detained Colombian irregulars and to withdraw his troops, according to press. Army commander Maj. Gen. Raul Baduel stepped in to squelch rumors in early June that Carrizales and Maj. Gen. William Warrick Blanco were going to be dismissed for having directed the operation. Baduel assured reporters the operation was "duly planned and authorized."

16. (U) Rumors circulated by the political opposition concerning other military incidents have kept the GOV on the defensive. In late May, "subversive leaflets" placed in military installations claimed that Castro was going to be named honorary "General in Chief" of the Venezuelan Armed Forces. Baduel denied the reports June 3 but confirmed that a graduating class for mid-level officers had chosen Castro as its "godfather." After an alleged incident surrounding the replacement of a National Guard regional command with army troops (SEPTTEL), GOV spokespersons refuted rumors of insubordination spread by opposition sources but announced that the Carabobo Day military parade scheduled for 24 June would be canceled because of a purported assassination plot hatched by "foreign" interests (read: Washington) and retired military officers. In response, opposition spokespersons condemned the Government for inventing threats against Chavez instead of explaining the military's internal problems.

Comment

17. (C) Colombian and Venezuelan irregulars could be rounded up by the hundreds if the military truly had the will and ability to take them on; indeed, even local civilians know where to find them. Instead, Chavez has ordered an operation that is mostly for show to try to convince the public and the military he is serious about their security. A more aggressive policy would be politically risky for Chavez. If he were to expand military operations, he would upset both corrupt GOV officials who benefit from trade with guerrillas and ideological officials who sympathize with them. Conversely, if he were to back down completely, he would marginalize both voters who suffer from the criminal behavior of illegal armed groups and some of their local Chavista leaders.

18. (C) Chavez does appear concerned about the threat of divisions within his armed forces. His decision to call off the June 24 parade may stem partially from concerns that elements within his own forces may be plotting against him, as some opposition figures have alleged. Recent confrontations reported between army and national guard units in Bolivar State and corruption in the DISIP security service (SEPTELS) reinforce the perception of divisions in the armed and security services. We do not yet see much fire beneath this smoke. But the longer it remains, and with a little careful fanning, a flame may still emerge.
Brownfield

NNNN

2005CARACA01829 - CONFIDENTIAL